

Two local educators named state teachers of the year

One was first in her family to get diploma

By Chris Moran and Leonel Sanchez

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Two local educators are among the five state teachers of the year, a competition for which more than 350,000 educators are eligible, the California Department of Education announced yesterday.

Andee Aceves teaches third grade at San Altos Elementary School in Lemon Grove. Tamara Reina teaches English and U.S. history at the East Mesa Juvenile Detention Facility in Otay Mesa.

"I'd like to use this opportunity as a discussion point about kids, about their potential, about keeping kids engaged in the educational process, about preventing the kinds of stories I have in my classroom," Reina said yesterday.

Reina's students face sentences ranging from a few months in Juvenile Hall to life in adult prison. She encourages her students to read, has her students write poetry and allows them to speak frankly through their writing or classroom discussions about their mistakes and their hopes for redemption.

"I think first of all it (the award) acknowledges that positive, proactive education can go on anywhere," Reina said. "The second piece is that it gives their stories a voice."

Aceves was the first person in her family to earn a high school diploma. She was raised by Spanish-speaking grandparents in National City.

"I let my kids know I understand some of the situations they're in," Aceves said yesterday. She wrote in her application that she relates to the "unruly child who comes to school despite the chaos he/she lives in," because she used to be that child, "the student that teachers talked about with disparagement in the teacher's lounge."

Aceves is president of the Lemon Grove School District's teachers union.

State teachers of the year are ambassadors for the profession. Last year's winners, for example, appeared at athletic events and on the televised drawing of lottery numbers. They traveled to Japan to observe teaching and they received special technology training from corporate sponsors.

Last year, the state's public schools hired about 19,000 new teachers. The state's 308,000 pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade teachers as well as an estimated 47,000 private-school teachers are eligible for the state awards.

California nominates one of its five honorees for the national teacher-of-the-year competition. This year's California representative is a high school engineering teacher in North Hills of the Los Angeles area.

Reina, 38, of Rancho Bernardo, and Aceves, 51, of La Mesa, will be flown to Sacramento in February to receive their awards at a dinner with the state superintendent of public instruction.

In the past five years, teachers from San Diego High, La Mirada Elementary in San Ysidro and Central Elementary in Escondido have also won state teacher-of-the-year honors. Stan Murphy of San Diego High was one of four finalists for national teacher of the year in 2005. In the past 30 years, three local teachers have been named national teachers of the year.

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